

## *Six Segments on Military Chaplaincy*

by Kathryn Knapp

For this essay six books on military chaplaincy are reviewed to determine their suitability for theological library collections. Each provides a picture of how ministry and military culture interact (and sometimes react) with one another. Understandings of the role and efficacy of the chaplaincy vary with the time, the context, and the theological perspective and background of each person who writes on this subject. With this in mind, care was taken to select only from a field of recent titles. Three of the books were written or compiled by academics or observers of the chaplaincy and three were written by current or former military chaplains.

In *The Sword of the Lord: Military Chaplains from the First to the Twenty-First Century* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), Doris L. Bergen and the various contributing authors examine how chaplains operated during hostilities between and within nations during the first millennium of the Common Era. Christian and Jewish authors, whether historically or anecdotally, offer the fruits of their research and their own perspective. The “last word” (in the final chapter) is spoken by Fr. Michael Baxter, a strong pacifist who praises the self-sacrifice of chaplains and simultaneously laments the fact that the ministers in military employ are generally too little the prophet due to their conformity with their surroundings.

Some of the book’s twelve co-authors (Bergen only writes the introduction) document their work as one would expect in an academic presentation. Others write essays (two are personal accounts of their own wartime experiences as military chaplains) and wistful commentaries. A few chapters are more gripping than others, but this is likely a matter of personal taste and historical interest. Those reading the texts for academic purposes may find it annoying that quotations and sources often are not properly referenced, yet the style and ease of the prose might make it a favorite for course reading lists and syllabi. Chapter 2, “The Liturgy of War from Antiquity to the Crusades,” is particularly valuable; it stands out because time and again nations blur the lines between politics and religion when seeking to bolster the support of the populace and the soldiers themselves. Although non-Abrahamic religions are not evenly represented in the book at large, this volume is nevertheless a comprehensive historical work. Future editions would certainly encompass the breadth of diversity that exists now in society and in the military chaplaincy itself.

A year after the appearance of the book edited by Bergen, Stephen Mansfield, who has a Ph.D in history, published a work entitled *The Faith of the American Soldier* (New York: Penguin Group, 2005). In an era sensitive to the damage that might be imposed on a culture by colonial and other ideologies, Mansfield’s work might be considered, if not flawed, certainly not representative of modern philosophies of chaplaincy, which stress valuation of differences in theologies and religious practice that provide meaning and support for today’s military membership. Perhaps part of the limits of Mansfield’s text are due to the fact that the author is not now and never has been a member of the military service, nor is he a trained theologian. Instead, his presence in Iraq was as a civilian researcher and author. As was noted for some of the chapters in Bergen’s book, it is problematic that *The Faith of the American Soldier* lacks references. For instance, Mansfield does not specify which of the stories he relates are his own interviews and which have been passed down to him. There are also other serious concerns about this work. Although he artfully opens a window into some present-day religious rituals of troops in combat, as a civilian he reflects only a cursory understanding of the military chaplaincy. For example, he incorrectly states that “a chaplain must attend every

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official service the military offers” (54). In fact, chaplains are never asked nor are expected to violate the tenets of their own faith group. They perform their denomination’s rites, sacraments, and ordinances and ensure that all other faith groups are given ample time and worship space for their own observances and practices (as long as good order and discipline are preserved and the mission is not compromised in any way).

Leaving aside the occasional inaccuracy due to unfamiliarity with military processes and protocol, Mansfield’s position on several key issues make this book interesting reading for those whose perspectives differ from his own. To illustrate, he sides with the chaplains who would prefer to bear arms and echoes the oft-spoken lament that the American government and institutions are more secular in practice than when they were first formed. Despite lamenting the increasing secularization, Mansfield affirms that today’s chaplains and America herself are truer to the Founding Fathers’ principles than ever before. Furthermore, he points out that all officers (a designation that includes all chaplains) who take the oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States are actually doing a better job in more recent times due in no small part to the modern litigation-happy climate.

In addition to the value of reading an author who clearly articulates his viewpoints in ways that would provide fodder for study and debate, Mansfield’s work makes another significant contribution. Specifically, many of his observations and interviews focus on the practices of the Millennial generation, and, as a result of his investigation, he draws very important conclusions about the use of “blended rituals” that are practiced amongst some worshippers in this age group. Thus, there is a strong case for inclusion of this book in a theological library collection.

Likewise, another text that might be described as recommended for select strengths within the text and not necessarily for its sum value is Charles E. Grooms’s *The Chaplain: Fighting the Bullets* (Raleigh, NC: Ivy House Publishing Group, 2002). The author served as a chaplain in the South Carolina State Guard. This group is better known as a “state militia,” which is an official but volunteer auxiliary, not a part of the fifty-four National Guard organizations. Thus, the author’s outlook is a bit more flamboyant than would be characteristic of his colleagues in the National Guard or in the active and Reserve forces of the United States Marine Corps, Air Force, Army, and Navy.

However, since Grooms is both retired and beyond the reach of the formal military structures, he is able to write colorfully about the political battles that the individual chaplain faces within his/her own Corps. Seasoned pastors are accustomed to congregational disagreements but newcomers to ministry, be it military chaplaincy or other clergy vocations, can certainly benefit from the warnings and realistic appraisals of the road ahead. Grooms’s purpose is not to shame the military chaplaincy but rather to prepare prospective entrants for a calling that has its organizational challenges and frequent heartbreaks. Forearmed chaplains who can handle adversity and diversity will be able to hold on and hold out.

At the same time, Grooms’s book offers a wealth of information on how to “perform” the work of a military chaplain facing for the first time the tasks of officiating at a memorial service or formal dining affair, writing letters of condolence, and offering a “general worship service.” If the reader can get past the hyperbole and the author’s world view, he or she is ultimately rewarded with good factual information and helpful suggestions.

To round out any collection, books written by those who are not part of the regular armed services should be balanced with those written by uniformed chaplains. The first of the two books under discussion written by military chaplains who served in Iraq is *A Table in the Presence* by Carey H. Cash (New York: Ballantine Books, 2005). Cash, a U.S. Navy chaplain serving in a U.S. Marine Corps battalion, chronicles the unit’s participation

in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. His writing makes continual reference to the Old Testament war chronicles. The message, intended or not, is that somehow his military unit follows in the footsteps of Middle Eastern ancestors who also had God on their side. Angels, not strategy and tactics, save the day and the Marines on a regular basis. Mansfield's warrior "prepares" and hopes to carry out God's will; Cash's warriors receive divine favor as recompense for their righteousness.

For emphasis (and justification of the assault on the city of Baghdad), Cash refers not to a point of law but instead to an inspirational message from the commanding officer. The commander is portrayed as encouraging the young fighters to yearn for the battlefield as their brave predecessors have done in generations past. The chaplain bluntly gives his personal opinions of Islam as a religion and the "non-combatant stance of military chaplains." For those involved in the military this book may be disquieting, as the author takes a stance that diverges from both official Navy policy on religious pluralism and the Geneva Conventions, which afford chaplains special status and protection. Incidentally, Cash now serves as the military chaplain at Camp David, where his "congregation" includes President Obama. For this reason alone, his book might be worth obtaining. Perhaps in carrying out his official duties Cash successfully moderates his personal convictions and truly does what "regulations" require of all chaplains first and foremost: to provide spiritual care that meets the needs of the receiver and not that of the giver.

Book number five, authored by a retired chaplain with significant military experience, is *War in the Garden of Eden* (New York: Seabury Books, 2008). Frank E. Wismer is an unabashed supporter of the Global War on Terrorism, and his introduction in this book reads more like a political statement than a theological text. A dialogue between Wismer and Fr. Michael Baxter (the pacifistic author mentioned above in the review of *The Sword of the Lord*) would be a most contentious and lively debate.

It is not clear to what audience Wismer directed his memoir. He writes of his personal encounters with high-ranking military personages. His chapters are typically short and need not be read in any set order. One can pick and choose which historical figures about whom one would like to learn more. Despite its academic shortcomings (most of his bibliographical information comes in the form of internet websites), Wismer's recollections of his service in Iraq certainly gives readers a look into how a chaplain's time is spent when a high-visibility headquarters assignment brings him or her into contact with the wartime coalition's highest ranking officers.

*Faith in the Fight: Civil War Chaplains* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2008), edited by John W. Brinsfield, William C. Davis, Benedict Maryniak, and James I. Robertson, Jr., is the final work to be considered. It goes far beyond chaplain memoirs such as those of Wismer and Cash and provides a fuller sense of history and genuine scholarship. The rosters of Union and Confederate chaplains occupy 129 pages in the paperback edition and are an interesting supplemental resource. Those interested in facts and figures will be rewarded as they pore through the names and affiliations of chaplains retained by the two armies.

Brinsfield et al. skillfully describe how chaplains involved in the War Between the States coped with ambiguity and complexity as they tried to be faithful to their cause and to their religious identity. Governments wrestled with minority faith groups wanting to be represented, and persons of color and women began to make a case for inclusion in the chaplaincy. The young nation did not come up with the perfect resolution, but it is amazing in itself that thoughtful persons considered such momentous changes during such an unstable time. In short, although this work is a history of a war that took place a century and a half ago, the kindnesses and finesse displayed by those chaplains may both inspire and educate present-day chaplains in similarly horrific situations.

Of the six books, *Faith in the Fight* and *The Sword of the Lord* are at the top of the list for consideration for inclusion in a theological library collection. As a related and closing footnote, it is highly recommended that libraries also obtain an electronic copy of the ten historical volumes on military chaplaincy which can be purchased for ten dollars per set from the Chaplaincy Center at Ft. Jackson, South Carolina. (To order, contact Dr. John Brinsfield, the U.S. Army Chaplaincy Center School Historian, at his e-mail address: [john.brinsfield@us.army.mil](mailto:john.brinsfield@us.army.mil).) After reading these volumes, one can more accurately assess embellished personal accounts and perspectives on the attributes and skills required of a properly trained military clergyperson of his or her day.

## WORKS CITED

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